

2011

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Recommended Citation

Matsick, Rob (2011) "An Ordinary Congressman and an Extraordinary Scandal: Alex McMillan and Iran-Contra," *Journal of Undergraduate Research at Minnesota State University, Mankato*: Vol. 11, Article 6.

Available at: <http://cornerstone.lib.mnsu.edu/jur/vol11/iss1/6>

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An Ordinary Congressman and an Extraordinary Scandal: Alex McMillan and Iran-Contra

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Abstract:

The Iran-Contra Affair was an infamous soap opera that pushed the Reagan Administration to the brink of annihilation. The repercussions to the main players of this and other tantalizing political affairs have been regurgitated *ad nauseum*. However, the effects on the more general political scene are often ignored. This paper is a case study that examines the diversionary political route that Alex McMillan, a Congressman unknown outside of North Carolina, takes to handle the negative effects of a Republican crisis to a Congressman that shares the party, but not the blame, for a national scandal. This case study aims to shed light on the highly complicated relationship between a politician and his constituency, as well as the subtleties of rhetorical versus legislative political strategy.

An Ordinary Congressman and an Extraordinary Scandal:

Alex McMillan and Iran-Contra

In November 1986, President Reagan asserted confidently: “In spite of the wildly speculative and false stories of arms for hostages and alleged ransom payments, we did not—repeat, did not—trade weapons or anything else for hostages, nor will we.”¹ Four accusation-laden months later, in March 1987, Reagan was singing a new tune: “A few months ago, I told the American people I did not trade arms for hostages. My heart and my best intentions still tell me that’s true, but the facts and evidence tell me it is not.”² This contradictory rhetoric would be embarrassing for any politician, but it was especially debilitating for a president who relied on a moral connection with much of the nation to garner support. A strong backlash against Reagan and his Administration permeated popular culture in the wake of this admission.

After this devastating confession and throughout the seemingly endless “blame game” during what became known as the Iran-Contra Affair, politicians and constituents lined up in droves to condemn the Reagan Administration in a highly publicized spectacle.³ According to Gallup polls, over 20 percent of the public ended their support of the President’s foreign policy between April 1986 and August 1987. Although this shift also resulted from various policy

¹ Donette Murray, *US Foreign Policy and Iran* (New York: Routledge 2010), p. 51.

² Murray, 52.

³ David J. Scheffer, “U.S. Law and the Iran-Contra Affair,” *The American Journal of International Law* 1987, pp. 693-723.

decisions in Angola, South Africa, and other nations, the primary reason for the change in national opinion was the highly publicized Iran-Contra Affair.

During the divisive Affair, Representative Alex McMillan, an ordinary member of Congress from North Carolina who was elected into Washington politics just two years before the Affair broke in November 1986, sought to separate himself rhetorically from Reagan to his constituency. Much of the American public linked the events of Iran-Contra directly to politicians such as Congressman McMillan, who played no explicit role in the Affair yet were indicted by their constituents for it. In a Republican Congressional Committee national survey taken in June 1988, nearly a third of respondents agreed that the way to send a message to Washington about Iran-Contra was to vote against the Republicans in the 1988 election.⁴ In response, McMillan used rhetoric to distance himself from the Affair to his constituency both by criticizing the Reagan Administration's role in Iran-Contra and attacking Reagan's ethical character.⁵ This was accomplished through letters, speeches, and editorials, which were rhetorical methods that proved to be the most direct and effective means of communication with constituents.

Although he established his rhetorical distance from the Affair, McMillan unflinchingly supported Reagan's voting policy on Iran-Contra to retain the backing of the Republican Party in Congress. "Iran-Contra legislation" amounted to a series of legislative attempts by the Reagan Administration to aid the Nicaraguan "freedom fighters" financially and militarily. McMillan logically backed these voting policies because Republican leadership in Washington exerted pressure on him to help unify the Party at the risk of political alienation from it. McMillan was

⁴ "National Republican Congressional Committee Survey," American Viewpoint, Inc.: June 1988.

⁵ B.L. Grayson, *United States-Iranian Relations* (Washington, DC: University Press of America 1981).

susceptible to this pressure because he was a new Congressman from Charlotte who had garnered little political standing in Washington, and was therefore dependent on incumbent Republicans as a base of political support. The Congressman acquiesced to Republican Party lines through his voting patterns and not his rhetoric because, I argue, votes are more visible to party leaders in Washington than rhetoric spoken to a North Carolina constituency hundreds of miles from the capital.

The analysis of Alex McMillan's legislative and rhetorical strategy helps us better understand the interconnected nature of politics on the national and regional level by framing the complex relationship between a politician, his party, and his constituency. In short, national affairs, like all politics, must ultimately play out through more specific constituencies. All politicians, except for the president and vice president, represent smaller divisions of a national constituency, whether a state, district, or town. Ideally, Congressional representatives assume power to promulgate the opinions of these specific constituencies in Washington, while the electorates retain the ultimate power to vote them out of office when they deem these officials are not representing them properly. Of course, this ideal often proves invalid because politicians regularly succumb to outside or minority interest groups, and constituencies sometimes vote against politicians based on reasons out of the representative's control. Despite the resulting flawed dynamic, constituencies retain the power to vote their representatives out of office during affairs, such as Iran-Contra, which often elude individual or even Congressional control. Therefore, this paper attempts to shed light on the damage control mode into which a politician is forced after a national scandal. Behavior during this mode reflects political strategy when decisiveness is most imperative, and the case study of Alex McMillan's pragmatic reaction to the Iran-Contra scandal is especially illuminating.

The “Affair”

The often sordid details of the Iran-Contra Affair are complex but well-known. Reagan and his Administration covertly sold arms to “moderate elements” in Iran, although moderate elements by Iranian standards were often still anti-American fundamentalists.⁶ These clandestine dealings flew in the face of the Congressional embargo on arms sales to Iran that was in place, yet the Reagan Administration still pushed the transactions for two unsavory reasons. First, some Administration members hoped that American hostages in Beirut would be released as a result of these shipments despite knowing that bargaining with terrorists was contrary to the Administration’s stance. More indirectly, some Administration officials sought to distribute funds from the arms deals directly to the Nicaraguan Contra movement.⁷ The Contra rebels were battling the Soviet-backed Sandinista government, which the Reagan Administration openly detested, in one of the last major proxy wars between the United States and Soviets as the Cold War drew to a close. However, the Reagan Administration was restricted in its efforts to provide funding for the Contras when Congress passed the Boland Amendments, which were a series of legislative measures introduced by Democrat Edward Boland of Massachusetts between 1982 and 1984. These amendments garnered immense support because Boland and many of his Democratic colleagues were non-interventionist with Central American policy and were upset with the Contras for peddling drugs to raise finances.⁸ The resulting Boland Amendments

⁶ B.L. Grayson, *United States-Iranian Relations* (Washington, DC: University Press of America 1981).

⁷ Murray, 51-55.

⁸ Murray, 51-55.

therefore galvanized the Administration into the use of covert, roundabout tactics to fund the Contras.⁹

North Carolina Representative Alex McMillan found himself caught in this crossfire between the Reagan Administration and an increasingly disillusioned voting public, and his prior experience could not have prepared the Congressman for the difficult mediation that was now necessary. McMillan was a conservative Republican who succeeded fellow Republican Jim Martin in 1984 as Congressman for North Carolina's 9th District, which at the time included Mecklenburg, Lincoln, Iredell, and parts of Yadkin County. His constituency was predominantly white and conservative and had been represented by Republicans since 1963, with McMillan perpetuating that trend. He was a graduate of the University of North Carolina with a degree in history, held an MBA from Virginia, had been the President of the Harris Teeter grocery store chain, and had served as the chairman of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg broadcasting authority.¹⁰ Along with these stellar business credentials, McMillan was well-versed in foreign affairs, having served as an Army intelligence agent stationed throughout Eastern Europe and as a delegate to NATO.¹¹ The Congressman was considered by many to be an independent thinker despite his general adherence to Republican Party lines. *The Charlotte Observer* endorsed McMillan over his more liberal opponent for the 1988 Congressional race, Democrat Mark Sholander, deeming McMillan a "conscientious, moderately conservative" representative despite acknowledging that liberal writers for the paper would "have ample occasion to disagree with him on specific votes over the next two years."¹² McMillan even won praise from Democratic

⁹ Murray, 53-55.

¹⁰ "J. Alex McMillan Papers, 1984-1994 Biographical Information," UNC Libraries Southern Historical Collection, <<http://www.lib.unc.edu/mss/inv/m/McMillan,J.Alex.html>>.

¹¹ "McMillan, John Alexander, III (Alex), (1932-)," Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, <<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=M000566>>.

¹² "Editorial: Observer Endorses Alexander McMillan for Congress," *The Charlotte Observer*, 30 Oct. 1988.

Representative David Price of North Carolina for being practical and for approaching most issues “without a lot of dogmatic assumptions.”¹³

The legislative ties that bind

For all of his purportedly autonomous tendencies, the question of whether Alex McMillan would choose to vote for or against Contra legislation, the broad series of legislative aid attempts by the Reagan Administration, purely based on ideology is a moot point. Instead, an increasingly irate voting public was the main concern for McMillan and any Republican Congressman during the Iran-Contra Affair, which necessitated political damage control in two dimensions. Inevitably, a Congressman must be concerned about his constituency for re-election, but there is the additional necessity for party unification in Congress. After the Affair broke in November 1986, the Democratic Congress issued its scathing “Majority Report,” which condemned the Reagan Administration’s abuse of power and asserted that an expansion of war time powers for the legislative branch was necessary to counteract these gross deficiencies.¹⁴

In a strong and somewhat frantic rebuttal, Wyoming Congressman Dick Cheney sought to hold the fractured Republican Party together by issuing the “Minority Report.”¹⁵ In this report, Cheney and other Congressional Republicans took exception to what they viewed as a gross distortion of the Constitution by the Democrats, and the document’s fiery rhetoric was dramatically polarizing in an already divided political environment. The report ironically stated: “A substantial number of the mistakes of the Iran-Contra affair resulted directly from an ongoing

¹³ Editors, *The Charlotte Observer*, 27 Mar. 1988, SHC McMillan Box 42.

¹⁴ Sean Wilentz, *The Age of Reagan* (New York: HarperCollins 2008), 230-8.

¹⁵ Dick Cheney, “A Critique of the Select Committees’ Majority Case (The Minority Perspective)”, sent to Alex McMillan by Representative Dick Cheney, 17 Nov. 1987.

state of guerrilla warfare over foreign policy between the legislative and executive branches.”¹⁶

With an air of desperation, the “Minority Report” went so far as to claim the real guerrilla war was not happening in the jungles of Nicaragua, but between branches of American government in Washington. The authors conceded that mistakes were made during the handling of the Affair, but they also claimed that the “unconstitutional” Boland Amendments and the politically motivated decisions by Oliver North and John Poindexter to cover up their diversionary actions were to blame.¹⁷ The “Minority Report” summarily derided the claims made in the Democratic “Majority Report” by asserting that “Mistakes of the Iran-Contra affair were just that—mistakes in judgment, and nothing more. There was no constitutional crisis, no systematic disrespect for the „rule of law,“ no grand conspiracy, and no Administration-wide dishonesty or cover-up.”¹⁸

In the letter to McMillan attached to the “Minority Report,” Representative Cheney bluntly stated the need to retain a cohesive party during the political thrashing that Republicans were sure to receive from the Democratic House and their constituents after the Affair.¹⁹ His concerns were justified. In an April 1986 Gallup poll, 52 percent approved of Reagan’s handling of foreign affairs, while only 34 percent disapproved.²⁰ These favorable numbers in April 1986 practically reversed themselves in August 1987 when a similar Gallup poll gave Reagan’s handling of general foreign policy a trifling 33 percent approval rating and 57 percent disapproval.²¹ With this growing sentiment of disfavor among the population, Cheney and the Republicans realized their party must present a unified, if minority, front in Congress.

¹⁶ Minority Report Writers, Dick Cheney et al, “Iran-Contra mistakes were judgment errors and have been corrected,” The Minority Report Press Release, 17 Nov. 1987.

¹⁷ The Minority Perspective.

¹⁸ “Iran-Contra mistakes were judgment errors and have been corrected,” The Minority Report Press Release, 17 Nov. 1987.

¹⁹ The Minority Perspective.

²⁰ “Gallup Poll #1262G,” 11-14 Apr. 1986.

²¹ “Gallup Poll #1987-859: Politics/Iran-Contra/Airline Safety,” 24 Aug.-2 Sep. 1987.

The greatest apprehension from the authors of the “Minority Report” was that Iran-Contra would lead to Constitutional alterations to executive power that would hinder the effectiveness of covert operations. In the “Minority Report,” Cheney referenced an addendum to a House Republican Research Committee report from December 1987 that emphasized the dire risk involved with any proposed alterations to executive war-time power.²² Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Adviser during the Carter Administration, claimed: “In the aftermath of the Iran-Contra Affair, the greatest risk is that we will legislate new restrictions so strict that they would guarantee that all the Congress would find itself overseeing is failed covert operations—or none at all.”²³ Brzezinski’s stand in aggressive defense of American covert operations represented a microcosm of the viewpoints of many politicians who strongly defended the executive’s ability to wage both overt and covert war. The polarizing rhetoric surrounding the Affair quickly morphed into legislative measures, and Congressional representatives were forced to take sides.

McMillan was a particularly easy recruit for the legislative unification bid necessary for Republicans after the Affair for two major reasons. First, he was a fledgling member of Congress. In addition to needing the support of his constituency, he was also more dependent on support from the national Republican Party apparatus than a more experienced representative with a strong political base in Washington. The Congressman was originally elected to the House in 1984 and was just beginning to acclimate to Washington when the Affair broke less than two years later. McMillan himself was aware of the Republican Party’s constraints on his voting policy. In a study conducted by the Congressman and his Defense Task Force Committee in anticipation of a House vote in 1988 concerning additional aid to the Contras, McMillan gave

²² House Republican Research Committee Iran-Contra Report, prepared by Andrew Goldman, 15 Dec. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 65.

²³ Iran-Contra Report, Andrew Goldman, 15 Dec. 1987.

two reasons that a swing vote representative would not support aid legislation, and his conclusions resonate because they were penned by his own hand.²⁴ In the study, McMillan alluded to Representative Bob Clement, a newly elected Democrat in the 5th District of Tennessee who would be sworn in on January 25, less than two weeks before the vote was to take place. McMillan doubted that Clement would support a vote to aid the Contras because Clement was a rookie Congressman more inclined to vote on his own Democratic Party lines because he was so new to Congress and desired the support of the national Democratic Party in Washington.²⁵

The second reason that McMillan was an easy recruit for Republican legislative unification after the Affair was that he was constrained by his own prior dependence on Reagan's coattails during the 1984 election. McMillan successfully captained an unfathomable underdog victory in 1984 against his Democratic opponent, D.G. Martin, a lawyer from Charlotte and a relative rock star in name recognition compared to McMillan.²⁶ In July 1984, a mere four months before the November elections, Martin was cruising with polls showing a commanding 59 to 28 percent lead over McMillan, with a mere 14 percent undecided.²⁷ Despite the dramatic odds against McMillan, he won in 1984 mainly by declaring support for Reagan's policies, especially economically, during a generally prosperous period. His campaign also trumpeted Reagan's personal character while associating his own values with those of the President. A common advertisement for McMillan's 1984 campaign was in *The Charlotte News* on August 29 of that year, in which McMillan was pictured laughing with the President by a cozy fireplace with the ringing, if presumptuous, endorsement by Reagan: "You may be sure that

²⁴ McMillan, Alexander, McMillan voting study for Feb. 3, 1988 Contra Aid Vote, Defense Task Force 1987; SHC McMillan Box 116.

²⁵ Contra Aid voting study.

²⁶ D.G. Martin Position Papers Biographical Blurb, SHC McMillan Box 145.

²⁷ How the 9th District Constituency would vote today (1984): p. 12; SHC.

I look forward to working with you in the 99th Congress.”²⁸ McMillan was a product of the Republican (read Reagan) Revolution, and the old maxim of “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” was especially applicable to the new Congressman after his miraculous victory in 1984.

McMillan’s support of the Republican Party during the Affair came in the form of legislation and not rhetoric, as it would be more easily perceived by Congressional Republicans if McMillan were to stray from support of Republican legislation than if he were to alter rhetoric to his 9th District constituency hundreds of miles from Washington. Party Unity scores from the weekly *Congressional Quarterly Magazine* reflect the percentage of times a representative casts a vote for his own party, and the results of these scores proved that Republicans closed ranks while the Affair was progressing between 1984 and 1988.²⁹ Annual Republican Unity scores in Congress hovered between 71 and 75 percent during these five years despite President Reagan’s waning influence as his time in office wore on. Representative McMillan was one of the loyal foot soldiers in the Republican Party that made these Unity scores possible. In 1985, he supported 81 percent of Republican legislation. After the Affair became public, McMillan’s adherence to Republican lines was 83 percent in 1987 and 79 percent in 1988, proving his unwavering party support on legislative matters throughout the crisis.³⁰

The Iran-Contra Affair produced a wide variety of specific Democratic legislation that attacked the Reagan Administration along with subsequent Republican legislation that defended it, and McMillan proved his loyalty by voting on strict partisan lines with all of these issues. Some Democratic propositions were radical, such as House Resolution 111, which was put forward by the fiery Representative Henry Gonzalez from Texas in March 1987 and sought to

²⁸ Advertisement, *The Charlotte News*, 29 Aug. 1984; SHC McMillan Box 145.

²⁹ 1988 Congressional Quarterly Almanac (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press), p. 36-B.

³⁰ 1988 CQ Almanac: p. 37-B.

impeach Reagan because of “high crimes and misdemeanors” related to the Affair.³¹ The resolution had no cosponsors and took exception to Reagan’s “acquiescence.”³² Although it decisively failed due to a dearth of support from McMillan and Republicans along with many Democrats, the fact that it garnered even trivial support showed that the political climate indicting Reagan during the Affair was often defined by political extremism and a zealous Congress.³³

There were also more moderate votes proposed by Democrats and opposed by McMillan that were designed to minimize the autonomy Reagan and the Republicans had to aid the Contras. H.J. Res. 175 was proposed by Democrat Thomas Foley of Washington and imposed “a moratorium on United States assistance until there has been a full and adequate accounting for previous assistance.”³⁴ The resolution was passed by a 230-196 vote on party lines with 156 Republicans, including McMillan, voting against the measure. Most Republicans supported the Administration by opposing this legislation, although many of the moderate bills that restricted financial support for the Contras still passed the Democratic House despite Republican opposition. These bills added fuel to the ceaseless wildfire in Washington that was ensnaring Reagan, but unlike the more radical propositions, they also presented a rational and deliberate foil to the Administration that greatly restricted the President’s actions.

Additionally, Republicans proposed bills to aid the Contra effort, and McMillan loyally voted for them. H.J. Res 540 was a failed House effort to approve \$100 million in aid to the Contras and lift the restrictions on the CIA and Defense Department for allocation of the aid.

³¹ Thomas, The Library of Congress, Bill Summary and Status 100th Congress, 1987-1988, H.Res. 111 <<http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/bdquery/D?d100:111:/list/bss/d100HE.lst::>>.

³² The Library of Congress, Thomas, as above.

³³ The Library of Congress, Thomas, as above.

³⁴ LexisNexis, 11 Mar. 1987, Search: “Moratorium on Contra Aid.”

Despite its failure, McMillan voted with a majority of Republicans in favor of the resolution.³⁵ HR 5052 was a subsequent effort to again allot \$100 million in aid to the Contras, \$70 million of which was for military purposes. This bill was adopted by a miniscule 221 to 209 majority that included overwhelming support by McMillan and Republicans, who cast 170 votes for the bill and only 11 against it.³⁶ Generally, the Administration fervently supported Contra-related legislation, as Reagan both had to save face and attempt to prolong his support for the freedom fighters in Nicaragua. These were difficult objectives that made Republican support in Congress integral to Reagan's efforts.

McMillan flexes his rhetorical autonomy

Despite McMillan's support of Reagan's handling of the Affair through his voting record, the Congressman took measured rhetorical steps away from the President's policies. This defiance was potentially less alienating from his Party than rebellion through an explicit vote would be. McMillan's reluctance to support Reagan rhetorically was a result of the President's loss of legislative mojo, as it were, and this resulted from a plethora of factors, not the least of which was the inevitable deterioration of political capital that faces a president who holds power for an extended period of time. Nonetheless, Iran-Contra at the very least exacerbated this erosion of popularity and often alienated Reagan even from those politicians who supported the President prior to the Affair, including Congressman McMillan. When Iran-Contra began unraveling in December 1986, McMillan was highly critical of the Affair in *The Charlotte Observer*. Although McMillan conceded it was in America's best interest to "pursue relations

³⁵ 1986 Congressional Quarterly Almanac (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press), pp. 394-5.

³⁶ 1986 CQ Almanac: pp. 394-5.

with moderate factions within Iran,” as he claimed the Administration was attempting to do, it was entirely unacceptable to ship arms covertly.³⁷

In his initial reaction to Iran-Contra, McMillan also defended the Democratic House that he was a member of yet often disparaged for its policy battles with Reagan. He blamed the Administration for not “informing Congressional leaders at the appropriate time” of the covert arms deals, and this implicit defense of a Democratic House at the expense of the Republican President further distanced McMillan from the Affair. Additionally, the Congressman asserted that any person found in violation of the law should be both “removed from office and prosecuted if cause is found.”³⁸ This claim resonated with his constituency because he made it less than a month after the Affair broke. Although McMillan had little knowledge of culpability at the time of his statement, he still sought to distance himself from anyone remotely implicated by the conjecture surrounding Iran-Contra. There was little attempt to defend the party to his constituency and absolutely no “innocent until proven guilty” rhetoric, which would have been quite understandable on his part given the ambiguity of the circumstances.

After many details of the Affair were revealed by Congressional inquiries and testimony from Administration officials, McMillan seemed to reach an ingenious political balance between explicit support for Reagan’s legislation with implicit condemnation of the President’s handling of Iran-Contra. The Congressman authored an editorial on February 1, 1988 for *The Charlotte Observer*, in which his commentary argued for continued aid to the Contras in support of Reagan’s stated policy objectives. However, McMillan framed the need for aid as one facet of a policy that transcended simple military affairs with his vague desire to promote human rights and democracy in Nicaragua. McMillan argued that “regional diplomacy” as part of a “dual-track

³⁷ Alexander McMillan, “The Serious Issues in the Iran Affair,” *The Charlotte Observer* 11 Dec. 1986: 15A.

³⁸ McMillan, “The Serious Issues in the Iran Affair,” 15A.

approach,” a stance that expanded on Reagan’s position of simple aid to the Contras, was necessary for the promotion of democracy in Nicaragua.³⁹ This balance allowed McMillan to vote with the President on Contra aid while simultaneously distancing himself from the same policy he was voting for. The Congressman’s legislative support for aid appealed the loyal supporters of Reagan in his constituency, while his rhetoric of human rights and democracy attempted to justify his vote to the element of his district that did not unflinchingly support the President.

McMillan further distanced himself from Reagan through the Congressman’s largely pacifist foreign policy rhetoric during the 1988 Congressional campaign. He often espoused militaristic and interventionist Cold War language prior to the Affair that aimed solely for a “reduction of Soviet promotion of regional conflicts” in places as varied as Central America, Africa, and the Middle East.⁴⁰ However, in his 1988 re-election campaign, McMillan seemed to replace this stern rhetoric with more flowery speech that often alluded to peace. On January 20, 1988, a press release announcing that McMillan would seek a third term in Congress addressed the budget almost exclusively while mentioning foreign affairs offhandedly. When foreign policy was referenced, McMillan idealistically noted “world peace” as an issue that the next Congress must work out, which was a crafty and subtle circumvention of more militaristic rhetoric in the wake of the embarrassing Affair.⁴¹ In a speech given at Mecklenburg GOP Headquarters on the same day that he announced his bid for re-election, McMillan again mentioned foreign affairs only in passing by asserting: “World security and peace do not come easily.”⁴² No issue in foreign affairs during 1986 or 1987 was as directly associated with the Administration or as

³⁹ Alexander McMillan, “Why I Support Contra Aid,” *The Charlotte Observer* 1 Feb. 1988: 12A.

⁴⁰ “Rotary Remarks,” 31 Aug. 1988, SHC McMillan Box 111.

⁴¹ Alexander McMillan, “McMillan Will Seek A Third Term,” 20 Jan. 1988 McMillan For Congress; SHC McMillan Box 175.

⁴² “Mecklenburg GOP Headquarters Speech,” Charlotte, NC, 20 Jan. 1988; SHC McMillan Box 175.

highly publicized nationwide as Iran-Contra, so McMillan's meek rhetoric seemed to be predominantly a byproduct of the Affair.

McMillan still wanted the support of Reagan voters in his 1988 re-election bid, but his rhetoric was a measured step back from his immense reliance on Reagan during the 1984 campaign. In 1988, the Congressman's explicit strategy was to "make sure that all voters which turn out for the President also vote for Alex," but McMillan strove for little else from the outgoing President.⁴³ McMillan's diffidence in enlisting Reagan's support was largely a result of his Democratic opponent, Mark Sholander, who led a campaign that attacked the incumbent Congressman as "ultraconservative and never varying from the Administration's line."⁴⁴ McMillan acknowledged that he was ideologically conservative, but asserted he was "willing to innovate where innovations are important."⁴⁵ With this response, McMillan chose to combat Sholander's critique of his "ultraconservatism" while dodging his association to the Reagan Administration, a comparison that McMillan was hesitant to concede in a 1988 re-election speech.

At the root of the Iran-Contra Affair was the philosophical Constitutional debate between executive power and legislative oversight, which Democrats and Republican waged their own war over. McMillan was not a loyal Republican rhetorically in this fight, as he conceded that the Affair "presents serious issues about executive responsibility and legislative oversight," an unthinkable admission for the more conservative elements of the Republican Party, such as Representative Dick Cheney from Wyoming.⁴⁶ Cheney brusquely argued that enforcing legislative oversight at the expense of executive initiative was itself unconstitutional. Although

⁴³ Alexander McMillan Staff, "McMillan '88 Committee Campaign Plan," July 25, 1988, SHC Box 154.

⁴⁴ Jim Morrill and Bill Arthur, "McMillan, Sholander Split on Key Issues," *The Charlotte Observer* 30 Oct. 1988: 1B.

⁴⁵ Morrill and Arthur, "McMillan, Sholander Split on Key Issues": 1B.

⁴⁶ Alexander McMillan, "The Serious Issues in the Iran Affair," *The Charlotte Observer* 11 Dec. 1986: 15A.

McMillan was against the transfer of war powers from the executive to the legislative branch, he did admit that there was a need to further distinguish the conditions in which the legislative branch must be informed of executive power.⁴⁷ This was a concession of dialogue concerning permanent alterations to the checks and balances system that the Democrats relished. With his rhetoric, McMillan seemed to be taking sides against the Administration and other Republicans with the crucial and fundamental philosophical issue of executive versus legislative power. At the time of McMillan's rhetoric, this issue had the potential to make the Affair transcend its temporal constraints by redefining the American political system, even if in hindsight it did not ultimately produce any major legislative changes.

Contadora: Before and after the crisis

The Contadora peace process largely reflected American public opinion concerning the Iran-Contra Affair, which in turn made it a pivotal issue for elected representatives such as Congressman McMillan. Contadora was a multilateral series of dialogues and agreements commencing in 1983 and lasting throughout much of the 1980s, which were spearheaded by Central American leaders originally from Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Costa Rica. These agreements attempted to end foreign intervention in Central America by the United States and Soviet Union. Various measures designed to "restore harmony and stability in Central America" were implemented, along with a cease-fire in fighting, free elections, and a free press.⁴⁸ The American public generally disapproved of Reagan's Contra policies and instead preferred the external Contadora process to the President's continued handling of affairs.

McMillan was forced to support this peace process rhetorically after the Iran-Contra Affair was

⁴⁷ Alexander McMillan, "The Serious Issues in the Iran Affair," *The Charlotte Observer* 11 Dec. 1986: 15A.

⁴⁸ "Contadora: Peace Process in Central America," *The U.N. Chronicle*, Mar. 1984, <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1309/is_v21/ai_3156271/>.

exposed, despite his view that the plan was too idealistic. Contadora was a central issue in Nicaragua before and after the Affair broke in 1986, and the plan even seemed to elicit idealistic support from shell-shocked Americans as Iran-Contra progressed.

There was a keen discrepancy in an American public that supported the Contadora plan but did not believe it would be successful. A national Gallup poll in August 1987 revealed that U.S. public opinion concerning the plan was highly favorable and perhaps even idealistic. Nearly 70 percent of Americans favored supporting the proposals, while only 18 percent did not. These views seemed to conflict with the results of the follow-up question that asked whether respondents felt the peace process was likely to meet its objectives. A relatively miniscule 45 percent of those polled believed the plan was “very likely” or “fairly likely” to achieve its goals, while an additional 45 percent thought that the plan was “not at all likely to achieve its goals.”⁴⁹ A mere 20 percent of those polled believed that funding of the Contras should continue, while an overwhelming 70 percent thought that the United States should wait on the Contadora process before considering additional Contra funding. These results reflected the public’s view that the alternative to a misguided peace process led by Central Americans was the further bungling of the situation by the Reagan Administration.

McMillan altered his rhetoric based on the growing sentiment by the American public that Reagan was drastically mistaken for not supporting the Contadora plan. Before the Gallup poll, McMillan sent a general letter to constituents in April 1987 who were “concerned about the Contadora peace process.” In his letter, the Congressman derided the process for not going far enough to address the complex state of affairs in Central America. McMillan asserted that

⁴⁹ “Gallup Poll #1987-859: Politics/Iran-Contra/Airline Safety,” 24 Aug.-2 Sep. 1987.

pressure on the Sandinista government by Western nations in the form of military assistance to “democratic forces” was integral to any amelioration of the situation in Nicaragua.⁵⁰

This letter in April 1987 was followed by a subsequent mailing in September to constituents interested in the Contadora process. This second correspondence was sent less than a month after the results of the Gallup poll that showed waning American public support for Reagan’s handling of the Affair, and in the letter McMillan seemed to alter his opinion to coincide with his constituency when he expressed explicit support for a peace plan calling for the termination of all military aid to the resistance forces. McMillan was unsure if the Soviets and Cubans would subsequently end their involvement in Nicaragua if the United States terminated its intervention, but he still used pacifist rhetoric when he stated that in spite of these concerns: “It is now time to give peace a chance.”⁵¹ McMillan based his confidence that the Sandinistas would adhere to the peace process on Nicaragua’s “mounting international debt” and “shattered economy with an inflation rate nearing one thousand percent.”⁵² Although these economic concerns were the purported reasoning behind McMillan’s change of heart, the Congressman seemed to factor in the declining popular support of Reagan’s decision-making as evidenced in the August Gallup poll.

McMillan critiques the Administration directly

McMillan even took the lead in evaluating the Reagan Administration’s handling of Iran-Contra policy directly with the White House, and this tactic ratcheted up his rhetoric. It was one thing to censure the Administration’s decisions to a constituency hundreds of miles from Washington, but it was another entirely to voice these concerns directly to the White House. The

⁵⁰ Alexander McMillan, Contadora Peace Process Letter, 27 Apr. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

⁵¹ McMillan, Contadora Peace Process Letter, 27 Apr. 1987.

⁵² Alexander McMillan, Central America Letter, 22 Sep. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

letter that McMillan sent on August 12, 1987 to Frank C. Carlucci, the Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, displayed McMillan's autonomy from Reagan.⁵³ In his message, the Congressman asserted that he supported Reagan's policy of providing aid to the Contras, which the Administration was forcing down Congress' throat with steadily declining success since the Boland Amendments were passed between 1982 and 1984. However, McMillan voiced concern that this policy was too narrowly focused, and he proposed a broader dualistic policy approach in addition to simple monetary aid. The Congressman's proposition included "developing grass roots support for change within Nicaragua," and encouraging negotiations among the Central American nations.⁵⁴ McMillan asserted: "From my vantage point, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the citizens of this country are not sufficiently supportive of the apparently limited focus of our existing Central American policy."⁵⁵ Most telling in McMillan's letter was his allusion to the dwindling support among his 9th District constituency for Reagan's "limited focus" in Central America, which was a particularly bold statement for a fledgling representative to make in a direct letter to the Administration.⁵⁶ The Congressman even implied that he had a better "vantage point" to gauge public opinion than what he viewed as the relatively detached White House.

McMillan impugned both Reagan's effectiveness as a leader and his decision-making capabilities directly to the Administration. In his letter to Carlucci, the Congressman accused Reagan of "relying on the specter of communism in our backyard to elicit continued popular support for aid to the Contras," and deemed this policy to be ineffective not only by McMillan's

⁵³ Alexander McMillan, Letter to Frank C. Carlucci, 12 Aug. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

⁵⁴ McMillan, Letter to Frank C. Carlucci, 12 Aug. 1987.

⁵⁵ McMillan, Letter to Frank C. Carlucci, 12 Aug. 1987.

⁵⁶ Alexander McMillan, Letter to Frank C. Carlucci, 12 Aug. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

own assessment but also because popular opinion had turned against Reagan's policy.⁵⁷ More importantly, McMillan's lecture on constituency viewpoints implied that the Administration was either out of touch with popular opinion or not interested in considering it. Either way, the Congressman no longer deemed it necessary to hide his frustration with the President's handling of the Affair, much less to assume Reagan's stances on Contra policy. McMillan's increased autonomy in his thinking was a silver lining for politics in general, as non-partisan political thought should generally be relished. Regardless of the implications, the Contadora issue no longer limited McMillan's criticism of Reagan's handling of the Affair to quiet discussions among his 9th District constituency in North Carolina.

The Character Indictment

In speeches to his constituents, McMillan further extended his criticism of Reagan from policy specifics relating to Iran-Contra to reproach of Reagan's character, an unlikely branch for Republicans to venture onto before the Affair. On December 11, 1986, immediately after the Affair was publicized, McMillan attempted to defend Reagan by alluding to the initially positive actions of the President in *The Charlotte Observer*.⁵⁸ Reagan removed two people in the Administration that were "aware of the diversion of funds," and appointed former Senator John Tower to lead an independent investigation into the Affair that eventually became known as the Tower Commission and implicated Reagan for being "asleep at the switch" during the Affair.⁵⁹ McMillan's initial concurrence with the President's decisions appeared to be a knee-jerk defense

⁵⁷ McMillan, Letter to Frank C. Carlucci, 12 Aug. 1987.

⁵⁸ Alexander McMillan, "The Serious Issues in the Iran Affair," *The Charlotte Observer*, 11 Dec. 1986: 15A; SHC McMillan Box 176.

⁵⁹ 1987 Congressional Quarterly Almanac (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press), p. 57.

of Reagan, who was the face of the Republican Party and at the time inextricably linked to the party's success.

However, in the following months, McMillan began to backtrack on his defense of Reagan's leadership ability and character as events surrounding the Affair, as well as the Tower Commission's findings, started to shed light on the President's role in the crisis. In a speech to a primarily Republican crowd at the Iredell County Lincoln Day Dinner in March 1987, McMillan only meekly defended Reagan's character by stating: "The President has talked with the nation and shown he is human like the rest of us, and he's shown that he has learned from events."⁶⁰ If there was any place to unapologetically defend Reagan in a rhetorical flourish, it would be to a group of rural North Carolina Republicans, yet McMillan deliberately avoided any stern rhetoric. Instead, McMillan's speech conceded Reagan's fallibility due to the Administration's handling of the Affair.

Additionally, the Lincoln Day speech took a jab at the mainstream media by questioning whether the media desired success for the country during Reagan's time in office, in what has become a persistent Republican refrain. McMillan argued that the Administration and subsequently the nation will recover from the setbacks to the country in domestic and foreign affairs, including the botched Iran-Contra Affair. The Congressman then sardonically asserted: "I believe that is what Americans want—despite the media."⁶¹ The popular media covered the Affair incessantly primarily because the Congressional testimony and revelations dragged on for over a year. McMillan's rhetoric asserted that the media coverage of the Affair was simply a persistent desire to see the Reagan Administration continue to founder at the expense of the American people, which was an uncharacteristically irrational assertion by the normally calm

⁶⁰ Alexander McMillan, "Iredell County Lincoln Day Dinner Speech," 21 Mar. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

⁶¹ Alexander McMillan, "Iredell County Lincoln Day Dinner Speech," 21 Mar. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

and pragmatic businessman. He emotionally claimed that the media aimed to sabotage the Reagan Administration, and further asserted that this objective was detrimental to the well-being of the American people. This emotional stab seemed to be a sign of his frustration not just with the media's handling of the Affair, but with the hoops he had to jump through for political damage control.

The issue of Reagan's political staying power was addressed very soon after the Affair broke, and McMillan's rhetoric on the matter lacked confidence. In a speech given by Frank Hill for McMillan to the International Association of Financial Planning in Charlotte on January 10, 1987, the Congressman's speech conceded: "President Reagan has had a substantial political setback with the Iran-Contra controversy and he no longer has Republican control of the Senate to depend upon."⁶² The lack of faith in Reagan's ability to recover politically from Iran-Contra was exacerbated by Republican losses in the Senate during the 1984 and 1986 elections, which both occurred before the Affair was made public. McMillan implied that with the addition of the debilitating Iran-Contra scandal, these election setbacks would lead to an increasingly overmatched president for the duration of his time in office. The Congressman was hesitant when he stated: "I would not plan on him (Reagan) being a completely lame duck for the next two years."⁶³ The conception of a president as a lame duck is something generally avoided by his supporters and drummed up by an anticipatory opposition, but McMillan's speech talked openly of the possibility here and seemed unconvincing with its meek appeal that Reagan would not suffer this fate.

The ethical indictment of the Administration was predictably common in the media throughout the Affair, but an unlikely source of incisive ethical criticism came from

⁶² Alexander McMillan, "Speech to International Association for Financial Planning," Charlotte, NC, 10 Jan. 1987; SHC McMillan Box 117.

⁶³ Alexander McMillan, "Speech to International Association for Financial Planning."

Congressman McMillan himself. In May 1987, he gave a speech on ethics at Myers Park Presbyterian Church, which implied that the characters of Reagan and two other prominent Administration members indicted in the Affair, Colonel Oliver North and Robert McFarlane, were flawed. McMillan argued: “Recent public events have served to highlight the challenge of public ethics,” and he offered a laundry list of current public figures that had struggled with ethical crises.⁶⁴ Alongside Reagan, North, and McFarlane, the Congressman cited Ivan Boevsky, a slimy thief who was embroiled in Wall Street investment scandals and scorned by the public. The implicit association of the Reagan Administration with a Wall Street swindler seemed to be a decision made with the goal of distancing himself from and not defending the White House.

McMillan continued his speech to the Myers Park Presbyterian Church by answering his own question: “Are we, as a culture, facing a moral crisis among our public officials, professionals, business executives, and ministers?” with a concise reply of “clearly yes.”⁶⁵ Similar to the crowd at the Iredell County dinner, the audience at the Myers Park Presbyterian Church was very religious and Republican, yet McMillan chose to question the ethics of the Administration and lift himself above reproach instead of defending Administration decisions. McMillan argued that there have been “countless examples of ethical failures of public and private figures,” and he alluded to the Israelite King Saul, who attempted to murder David out of jealousy, to the Presbyterian crowd.⁶⁶ The Biblical reference implicated the President and key Administration figures by associating them with one of the most infamous villains in Biblical history. The Congressman’s accusatory language was particularly incisive because of the immense rhetorical effort that Reagan expended to paint himself as an ethical, Christian man

⁶⁴ Alexander McMillan, “Political Ethics from a Professional Point of View” Speech, Myers Park Presbyterian Church, 17 May 1987.

⁶⁵ Alexander McMillan, “Political Ethics from a Professional Point of View” Speech.

⁶⁶ Alexander McMillan, “Political Ethics from a Professional Point of View” Speech.

coming out of Hollywood, which was the exact image that McMillan shattered with his speech. Before the Affair, Reagan enjoyed considerable impunity from questions of character due to his vast support from the Christian community, but McMillan's speech was one of many that temporarily lowered this sort of ethical veil that was so cleverly constructed to shield the President from criticism.

Conclusion

It was politically pragmatic for McMillan to attack the Reagan Administration and Reagan as an individual because Iran-Contra implicated all Republicans to a certain degree. On one hand, shunning Republican positions on legislation was impossible due to McMillan's dependence in part on support of the national Republican Party as a fledgling member of Congress. Simultaneously, McMillan distanced himself from the wave of disdain that many Americans felt towards the Reagan Administration by attacking both the Administration's handling of the Affair as well as Reagan's character. Despite the immense popularity of the President who was the face of the conservative movement, the political issues that conservatives took sides on, including abortion and reduced taxes, were the only elements of the movement that were untouchable. A scandal does not logically alter a person's ingrained opinions on substantive issues; however, no politician was beyond reproach. McMillan was aware of this reality and chose to mirror his constituency's indignation for the Reagan Administration's handling of foreign policy from late 1986 through much of 1988. He accomplished this objective by delivering rhetorical flourishes against the President that were at times as passionate as the prior assertions of support for Reagan that helped carry McMillan into Washington just a few years prior, in 1984.

The alteration of McMillan's political strategy in light of the Affair highlights the intricate web that is woven by different politicians and their particular constituencies in a representative democracy. The president is elected on the national level and has to serve the needs of a vague general public. The bureaucrats in the president's administration are even more removed from accountability, as they enjoy two degrees of separation from voters. Congressmen are tasked with mediating between their particular constituencies and Washington, and they often assume the brunt of their constituents' ire when national affairs go awry. McMillan walked a tightrope between Republican Congressmen, including Dick Cheney, ready to unify the party at any cost, and a displeased constituency armed with the authoritative vote. With his strategy of legislative support and rhetorical distance, McMillan adroitly appeased both groups to decisively attain House re-election until he chose not to run again in 1994. McMillan's extensive Congressional tenure was well-earned due to his dexterity with political damage control in even the most volatile of affairs.

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